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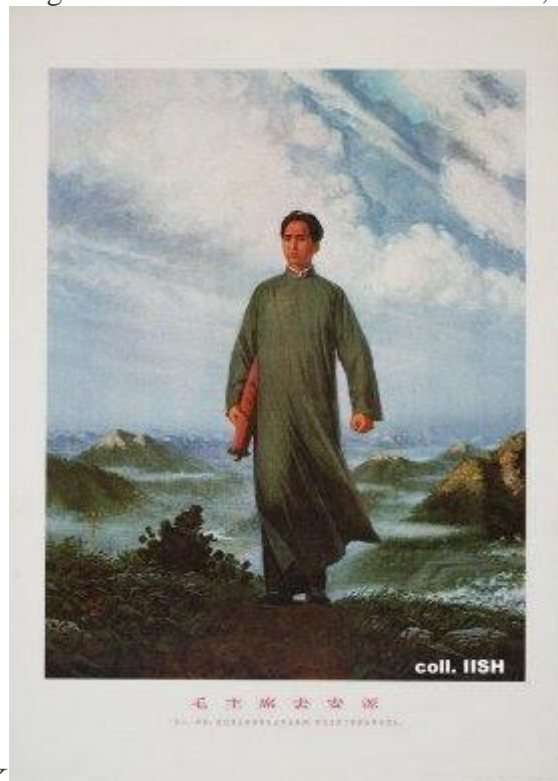
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Report from the Road: AAS Meeting, 2008

April 14, 2008 in [Uncategorized](#) by [The China Beat](#) | [1 comment](#)

As our regular readers will have noticed, *China Beat* has been unusually quiet of late. This is mainly because we were out of range of the internet two weeks ago to attend the Association for Asian Studies (AAS) annual meeting in Atlanta, Georgia (and in recovery from the conference hubbub the following week). The AAS is primarily composed of scholars but is also open to those in other fields who study and think about Asia; it has about 7,000 members, with a few thousand in attendance at this conference.

We took advantage of the largest gathering of *China Beat* contributors in one place since our founding to have breakfast together (where we also got feedback on the blog and brainstormed with a friend of the blog in the world of publishing) before everyone dashed off to hear panels, meet with publishers, and catch up with colleagues from other institutions. Paul Katz, Tim Weston, Nicole



Barnes, Jeff Wasserstrom, and Kate Merkel-Hess were in attendance. As most of us had not met the others before (Jeff was the link between us all), the breakfast gathering was an affirmation of the fundamentally virtual nature of this endeavor.

However, we were not the only ones at the meeting who were considering how those involved in Asian studies could be writing and talking to a larger public. Several crowded sessions featured scholars who have made "outreach" (in other words, work that goes beyond the standard academic job description of teaching and research) a central part of their practice. These included a panel on "New Dimensions in China Watching: Internet Forums and the Study of Contemporary China" (chaired by Richard Baum of the University of California, Los Angeles); "China's Move into the Global Spotlight: Implications for Scholars" (chaired by Jeff Wasserstrom of UCI), and "Public Intellectuals: Old Hands and the New Generation in China Studies" (chaired by Kristin Stapleton of the State University of New York, Buffalo). The lack of empty seats at these panels indicated the general interest in the topics at hand,

and the lively discussions that followed the sessions reiterated how seriously many of those in attendance were considering the implications of public engagement.

AAS President Elizabeth Perry even raised the issue of public engagement in her Friday night presidential address on reconsidering the legacy of the Chinese Revolution, a remarkable lecture (nicely illustrated with visuals) that centered around the history and memorializing of CCP labor organizing in Anyuan in the 1920s (she used the 1960s image above—Mao Goes to Anyuan—and its many variations to talk about how revolutionary memories have evolved in recent decades). In effect, Perry challenged the scholars in the audience to question (and then question again) the dominant narratives that emerge around particular events—using her own beginnings in Chinese studies (as a member of the Committee of Concerned Asian Scholars, an organization whose members viewed Mao’s legacy much more positively at the time than most of them do now) to illustrate how our understanding of historical topics can change, in part simply because of new information coming to light. As she noted in closing, paraphrasing a line by the late great Benjamin Schwartz (and here we paraphrase her paraphrase from our notes): “The Chinese Revolution probably wasn’t necessary, but China definitely needed a revolution.”

In her talk, provocatively titled “Reclaiming the Chinese Revolution,” Perry’s goal was to remind us that there were roads not taken at many stages in the unfolding of the events of the 1910s-1970s. This means that China might easily have ended up with a revolutionary legacy less stained with bloodshed, more attuned to the goals of equality and openness, than the one now associated with the Maoist era. A powerful presentation, it is one that will be worth revisiting and taking in more fully when it appears in print in the *Journal of Asian Studies*, the flagship publication of the AAS, in November.